



## Using Family-of-Origin Recollections in Premarital and Marriage Counseling\*

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Alfred Adler and subsequent Adlerians have discussed at length the tremendous influence of the family on children as they creatively construct their "Life Style," the Adlerian nomenclature for personality. Further, Adlerians have noted that one's early memories of family relations are equally important for how persons construe the roles and responsibilities of marital relations (Adler, 1956, 1979; Dinkmeyer, Dinkmeyer, & Sperry, 1987; Dreikurs, 1946; Manaster & Corsini, 1982; Mosak, 1984; Shulman & Watts, in press; Sperry & Carlson, 1991).

In premarital counseling, potential problem areas, if addressed at all, are often approached in terms of how the couple plans to negotiate them. In reality, most soon-to-be-married couples are oblivious to the impact of real or perceived family-of-origin issues, and seldom are very objective regarding potential relationship difficulties. Likewise, in marriage counseling, troubled couples seldom instinctively see how influential their perceptions of their family of origin may be for their present marriage and family relationships.

The *How I Remember My Family Questionnaire* (see Appendix) was developed to access the early recollections of couples regarding specific aspects of their families of origin. The questionnaire seeks to assess aspects of Adlerian lifestyle information (see Baruth & Eckstein, 1981; Dinkmeyer, Dinkmeyer, & Sperry, 1987; Eckstein, Baruth, & Mahrer, 1982; Mosak & Shulman, 1988) specifically relevant to premarital and marital counseling in a manner similar to that of Watkins' (1982) *Self-Administered Life Style Analysis*. Questions regarding the marital relationship of the individual's parents address selected key elements of marital relationships (Baruth & Huber, 1984; Dinkmeyer & Carlson, 1984, 1989;

Dinkmeyer, Dinkmeyer, & Sperry, 1987; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1996; Hawes & Kern, 1989; Ijams, 1989; Nichols, 1988). This appears to be a logical choice because there is a substantial body of literature suggesting that the attitudes and actions of the marital/parent dyad in a system largely determines the family atmosphere, a crucial influence for the psychological development of children and their subsequent interpersonal relationships (e.g., Dewey, 1971; Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1996; Dinkmeyer, McKay, & Dinkmeyer, 1997; Dreikurs, 1946; Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964; Satir, 1983, 1988).

In both premarital and marriage counseling, the *How I Remember My Family Questionnaire* may help counselors/therapists understand both the individuals and their relationship better and, consequently, be useful in helping couples become more aware of their relationship's assets and potential/present liabilities. By using the questionnaire as a guide, helpers skilled in using techniques such as clarification, guided discovery, and socratic dialogue may access and investigate a great amount of useful information.

### **Using the Questionnaire**

Both partners are given a copy of the questionnaire prior to leaving from the initial session. Ask them to answer the questions, independent of their partner, on separate sheets of paper and bring their answers to the next counseling session. Stress that they answer the questions in an open, honest manner and request that they not discuss their answers until the next scheduled meeting.

At the next session, begin helping the couple debrief from the questionnaire in whatever format you are comfortable with. One suggestion is to let the couple take turns, working through the questionnaire section by section. Throughout the process I ask them to discuss questions such as: (1) What did you learn about yourself/about your partner from this section of the exercise? (2) What areas of agreement and disagreement did you discover? Furthermore, I offer hunches gleaned from their questionnaires—in the form of hypothesis questioning—and guide the couple in a discussion/dialogue.

The questionnaire debriefing and discussion will usually take several sessions. It is recommended that the couples not discuss the questionnaire outside the session until it is completed. Based on the debriefing and discussion times, couples and counselors typically have a wealth of information for future counseling sessions, goal-setting, and remediation.

### **Case Study**

Jill and Tommy were referred to me by their minister for premarital counseling. They had dated for six months and were scheduled to be married in

8 weeks. Jill was 20 years old and Tommy was 22. After completing the general procedures necessary with new clients and some preliminary discussion, I gave both Jill and Tommy a copy of the questionnaire and briefly discussed it. They agreed to answer the questions and return the following week.

In the several sessions needed to debrief and discuss the couple's answers, we discovered that they had highly conflicting opinions regarding the roles of husband and wife and also very different views on parenting children. They had never talked about their individual expectations of their partner as husband/wife or father/mother. The debriefing and discussion process helped them discover very large areas of concern for their future marital and family relationships. Consequently, Jill and Tommy decided to postpone their wedding to do further individual and relationship work in counseling. After approximately 3 months of work, the couple decided that they were much better prepared for commencing their life together and rescheduled the wedding.

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### Reference Note

Portions of this article are adapted from Richard E. Watts (1995), "How I Remember My Family: A Premarital and Marriage Counseling Questionnaire," *The Family Journal*, 3, 155–157. © American Counseling Association. Used with permission.

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## **Appendix: The “How I Remember My Family” Questionnaire**

Please answer the following questions based on your childhood memories of your family. Please do not write on this sheet.

### **My Father**

1. How would you describe your father? How would you describe his personality style?
2. How would you describe your relationship to him?
3. In what ways are you similar to your father? In what ways are you different?

### **My Mother**

1. How would you describe your mother? How would you describe her personality style?
2. How would you describe your relationship to her?
3. In what ways are you similar to your mother? In what ways are you different?

### **My Parents’ Marriage**

1. How would you describe your parents’ views of their roles and responsibilities as husband and wife? Was one partner more dominant, or was it a fairly equal relationship? What is your overall impression of their relationship?
2. What was the decision-making process? That is, how were decisions made, and who usually made them?
3. How would you describe the communication between your parents in their marital relationship?
4. How was marital conflict handled?
5. How did your parents manage finances?
6. What was the division of labor in managing the home, possessions, social life, vacations, and the like?
7. How did your parents relate to extended family members (in-laws, other relatives, and close family friends)?

8. How did your parents view human sexuality? How was intimacy and sexuality understood and expressed in their relationship?
9. How did your parents address the subject of religion?
10. What impact did your father's and mother's vocations have on their marital relationship?
11. What aspects of your parents' marriage do you want to incorporate into your marriage? Why? (Be sure to check your responses to questions 1–8 above.)
12. What aspects of your parents' marriage do you want to avoid? Why? (Be sure to check your responses to questions 1–8 above.)

### **Your Parents as Parents**

1. How did your parents feel about having children? Do you want children? Why or why not? How is your perspective of children similar and/or different to that of your parents?
2. Describe your parents' *parenting* style. That is, describe your parents as parents. Were they in agreement on how the children should be reared? Please explain your answer.
3. What aspects of their parenting style do you want to incorporate into your family? Why?
4. What aspects of their parenting style do you want to avoid? Why?

### **Your Siblings**

1. How many brothers and sisters do you have? In what order were they born?
2. How would you describe your brother(s) when you were children? How would you describe him/them now?
3. How would you describe your sister(s) when you were children? How would you describe her/them now?
4. Which of your siblings are you most like? Please explain.
5. Which of your siblings are you most unlike? Please explain.

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